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# The Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor, with the life of Mademoiselle le Gras, Their Foundress

BY PIERRE HÉLYOT AND MAXIMILIEN BULLOT

TRANSLATED BY MARTHA BEAUDOIN, D.C.

*An early eighteenth-century account of the establishment  
and history of the Daughters of Charity<sup>1</sup>*

There are nuns and secular girls who were established for the care of the sick, similar to the large number of hospitalers already spoken about [in a previous chapter] and others about whom we will speak a little farther on. There were others who were established for the education of girls and others too who worked principally at their own perfection. But the Daughters of Charity, servants of the sick poor, have done all of these things. It is owing to the zeal of Monsieur Vincent de Paul, founder of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, that this holy institution was established. This servant of God preached at Châtillon-les-Dombes in Bresse in the year 1617 and asked for help for a poor family of the area whose children and servants had fallen ill and lacked all the basic help. His words were so animated with the fire of charity that a large number of people went to visit the family, taking bread, wine, meat, and other aid. Since the people of this city seemed so willing to do charitable works, Monsieur Vincent conferred with several of the most zealous and well-off women of the parish about how to put some order into the help rendered to these poor sick people and to others who would find themselves in a similar situation in the future so that they could be assisted during their illness. For this purpose, he

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Hélyot (1660-1716) was a Picpus Father whose name in religion was Hippolyte. His position as secretary to the provincial of his community necessitated wide travel, affording him the opportunity to collect materials for his masterful multi-volume work *Histoire des Ordres monastiques, religieux et militaires, et des Congrégations séculières de l'un et de l'autre sexe*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1714-1719). The work was actually a collaborative effort because Hélyot died during the printing of the fifth volume; the final three were written by his confrere, Maximilien Bullot, using Hélyot's research. This article is chapter 14 of the sixth volume. Ed.

devised a set of rules the women would strive to observe after it had been approved by superiors. He chose officers from among them who had to meet monthly with him to render an account of what had transpired during that time.

The good results produced by the establishment of this first Confraternity or Assembly of Charity encouraged this pious missionary to do his best to obtain the same corporal and spiritual advantages for the sick poor in every place he went or sent others to preach the mission. God granted so many blessings to this pious work that even though the original purpose of these confraternities was to serve only in rural areas, one was nevertheless established in Paris at the parish of Saint-Sauveur in 1629. They spread into so many cities that although their founder had given them appropriate regulations for their conduct, he went from time to time to visit them or sent priests of his Congregation. These organizations would nevertheless have been deprived of the help they needed if God, who never abandons his own, had not inspired Made-moiselle le Gras to dedicate herself to these works of charity under the direction of Monsieur de Paul.

This young noblewoman was born in Paris on 12 August 1591. Her father was Louis de Marillac, lord of Ferrières,<sup>2</sup> and her mother was Marguerite le Camus. She was given the name Louise at her baptism and lost her mother at a very early age.<sup>3</sup> Finding himself alone and responsible for her, her father took particular care about her education. He sent Louise as a boarder to the monastery of the nuns at Poissy, where he had some relatives, so that through their care she would receive the basics of piety and virtue.<sup>4</sup> Some time later, he withdrew her from there and placed her under the care of a governess, who was intelligent and virtuous, to teach her the works suitable to her social status, offering her every opportunity to excel in her education. She studied painting and philosophy so that she could rise above the ordinary knowledge of women of her day.

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<sup>2</sup>He was, in fact, lord of both Ferrières and Farainvillier. Ed.

<sup>3</sup>Following Nicolas Gobillon, Louise's first biographer, Hélyot and Bullot accept the doubtful story that Marguerite le Camus was the saint's mother. It is certain that Louise was illegitimate. Her birth in 1591 occurred between the two marriages of her father, whose first wife, Marie de la Rozière, died in 1588 or 1589, some six years before his second marriage to the widow of Louis Thiboust, Antoinette le Camus. In legal documents, Louis de Marillac quite candidly referred to Louise as "*ma fille, ma naturelle*" (my natural daughter). Her own marriage contract with Antoine le Gras referred to her in the same way: "the natural daughter of Louis de Marillac." It is interesting to note that her alleged—and quite probably fictitious—mother had the same surname as Louise's step-mother. Ed.

<sup>4</sup>Madame Catherine-Louise de Marillac, the aunt of Louise's father, was a Dominican nun at the royal Abbey of Saint-Louis-de-Poissy. Ed.

The knowledge Louise acquired through study and reading, which took up most of her time, gave her such a contempt for the vanities of the world and such a great taste for religious life that she wanted to become a Capuchin nun. Father Honoré de Champigny, himself a Capuchin priest who lived a very saintly life, turned her away from this direction by pointing out that the weakness of her temperament would not allow her to withstand the austerities of such a hard and penitent life; she would always be unable to live up to her obligations. And so after she gave it considerable thought, God made it known to her that it was his holy will that she not enter religious life. His divine majesty had other plans for her.

A while later, having lost her father and finding herself obliged to get married, she was wed in 1613 at the age of twenty-two to Monsieur le Gras, the secretary of Queen Marie de Medici. His family had distinguished itself by a love of the poor which resulted in the founding of a hospital in the city of Pouy. From the first years of her marriage, Louise applied herself to visiting the sick poor in the parish where she lived. She herself gave them broths and remedies, made their beds, instructed them, consoled them, exhorted them to receive the sacraments, and buried the dead. Not satisfied with helping the sick in their homes, she went to visit them in the hospitals and by her counsel and example attracted several ladies to do the same. In this way she was preparing herself for the relief of all the poor.

God blessed her marriage with the birth of a son, whom she raised with special care and for whom she subsequently secured an appointment as councillor in the Court of Finance.<sup>5</sup> She lost her husband at the end of 1625 and began at that point to have no other spouse than Jesus Christ in conformity with a vow she made on 4 May 1623. On that date, seeing that her husband was dangerously ill, she resolved that if God should take him, she would remain a widow according to the advice of Saint Paul. When death took her husband, she carried out this resolution, thinking only of redoubling her devotions and prayers and

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<sup>5</sup>In fact, Louise de Marillac had little or nothing to do with her son Michel's appointment to the Court of Finance. It resulted from the prenuptial negotiations for his marriage to Gabrielle le Clerc, daughter of the late lord of Chennevières. Michel had no income, and Louise lacked sufficient resources to purchase him a position in government. Moreover, her relatives, the Marillacs, were slow in coming up with the money promised to conclude the affair. The matter was resolved satisfactorily when the bride's uncle, René-Michel de la Rochemaillet, resigned his post in the Court of Finance in favor of Michel. Ed.

sanctifying herself more and more by frequent reception of the sacraments, works of charity, spiritual reading, meditation, fasting, and penance.

Her spiritual director, Jean-Pierre Camus, the bishop of Belley, saw that she had the intention of applying herself solely to works of piety. But since he could not always be present to lead her to the state of perfection she wanted, he decided to confide her to Monsieur Vincent de Paul, who was at that time just beginning the Congregation of the Mission at the Collège des Bons-Enfants. This obliged Mademoiselle le Gras to move in 1626 to the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet near the college. Such proximity gave her the opportunity to learn the actions of this apostolic man, who was engaged in all sorts of charity. She felt herself more moved than ever to devote her life to the service of the poor. She communicated her intention to her wise director who did not judge it opportune to encourage her desire. In order to know if it was the spirit of God acting in her, Vincent deferred giving her permission until 1629. Meanwhile, he sent her to visit the Confraternities of Charity, which he had established in several villages for the assistance of the sick poor.<sup>6</sup> She received orders from Monsieur de Paul with great joy and submission, and gave him such perfect obedience that she never undertook anything without his advice or order, considering him the minister and interpreter of God's will.

Her first journey was to Montmirail in the diocese of Soissons. Before leaving on these trips, she would obtain from this holy founder written instructions detailing her task. On the day of her departure, she would receive communion in order to receive from Jesus Christ a more abundant charity and a surer pledge of his protection and action. She was ordinarily accompanied on these trips by some pious ladies. Making these journeys in tiresome coaches, she suffered many inconveniences, living and sleeping in very poor accommodations to experience personally the misery of the poor so that she could then encourage them to bear their sorrows more patiently. She organized similar establishments in Paris, the first at the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet in 1630. The following year others were opened in the

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<sup>6</sup>According to the text above, Louise was visiting Confraternities between 1626 and 1629. In fact, that was not the case. Her first visitation, made in May 1629 at Vincent's urging, was to the Confraternity in Montmirail. Ed.

parishes of Saint-Benoît and Saint-Sulpice<sup>7</sup>. Still others followed. Louise was able to set up comparable establishments in the countryside.

Up to that time, confraternities had been formed only in villages or, at the most, in small towns. The women themselves carried out the work of caring for the sick, making the beds, preparing the meals, and offering the necessary remedies. But after the first establishment in Paris, a change was introduced in the service of the sick. Because the confraternities were joined by a large number of very wealthy and highly placed ladies who were unable by themselves to provide the essential services to the sick, it became necessary to establish servants of the poor who could be employed in this ministry under the direction of these ladies. This was undertaken through the help of Monsieur de Paul, who had proposed this plan to some country girls, several of whom had volunteered to devote their whole life to this work. Dependent on the ladies of the parish, these girls had no link or communication with each other. This precluded their being well instructed for either the service of the poor or their exercises of piety. When it became necessary to move some of them or send some to a new foundation, it was difficult to find any who were well prepared. Therefore, Monsieur Vincent de Paul believed that it was necessary to bring these girls together in community under the direction of a superior to form them in the exercises of charity so they could be sent out as needed. He found no one more worthy of this task than Mademoiselle le Gras, in whom he had recognized for many years a solid prudence and exemplary piety. He confided these girls to her. They were lodged in her house and lived in community. At that time she lived near Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. The little community was established on 21 November 1633.<sup>8</sup>

After taking charge of training the girls, Mademoiselle le Gras had such a love for this vocation that the following year on the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, she consecrated herself to it by vow, renewing at the same time her vow of widowhood made in 1623. Seeing herself committed more strongly to Jesus Christ whom she had

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<sup>7</sup>The text gives the impression that Louise established the confraternities at these two parishes. She was, however, out of town when each was founded. It should also be noted that the first confraternity erected in Paris was at Saint-Sauveur in 1629. Louise had no hand in its foundation. Ed.

<sup>8</sup>In fact, the community first came together on the 29th rather than the 21st. Following Gobillon, Hélyot and Bullot attributed the initiative in establishing the Daughters of Charity to Vincent. The latter actually had no plan at all to found them and never foresaw what would eventuate. The first country girls to aid the ladies of charity were not recruits of Vincent but volunteers of Louise. She it was who wanted to bring them together into community. Only reluctantly and cautiously did Vincent grant Louise permission to form the new company. Ed.

taken for her portion and inheritance, she recalled all her fervor and from that time onward sought only to unite herself to him through all sorts of good works but especially by holy communion. She received it very often both to offer him thanks for the grace given in calling her to this state and to draw his blessing down on what her love for his divine majesty made her undertake for the consolation of the poor. Such holy dispositions sustained by such perfect confidence in Providence could not but merit for her a happy success. God takes pleasure in causing the fruits of his goodness to be felt by one whose heart is righteous and who let herself be led by the adorable dispositions of his will. He soon allowed her to see how pleasing her undertakings were to him by procuring for her the necessary funds to support her community and those works of mercy for the sick poor. This happened through the establishment of a society of Parisian ladies whose rank and riches were more than sufficient to provide not only for the needs of the poor of the city but also for those of the most distant provinces.<sup>9</sup>

The original purpose of this company of ladies was to give some relief to the sick of the Hôtel-Dieu. Mademoiselle le Gras and some others recognized during their visits to these poor that much care was lacking because the hospital was unable to provide it for them. Given this information, Monsieur de Paul advised the ladies to hold meetings to develop a plan to provide for these needs. The first assembly took place in 1634 at the home of Madame President Goussault.<sup>10</sup> Present were Madame de Villesabin, Madame de Bailleul, and Mademoiselle Pollalion, foundress of the Daughters of Providence. The second meeting was larger than the first. Madame Chancellor<sup>11</sup> honored it by her presence together with Madame Fouquet. The ladies resolved to provide the sick of the hospital daily supplies of preserves, jellies, and other sweets by way of snacks. Each lady would take a turn distributing these things and would accompany this charitable act with some spiritual consolation. In order to make the assembly more orderly, three officers were chosen: a superior, an assistant, and a treasurer. It carried on thus until Monsieur de Paul through experience remarked that it was difficult for the same persons to be able to take care of both spiritual and corporal works of mercy. He deemed it necessary that every three months fourteen ladies of the group, those best able to exhort and instruct, be chosen to

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<sup>9</sup>This was the Association of the Ladies of Charity of Paris. Ed.

<sup>10</sup>Geneviève Fayet Goussault, widow of Antoine Goussault, president of the *Chambres des Comtes de Paris*. Ed.

<sup>11</sup>Madeleine Fabri Séguier, wife of Pierre Séguier, chancellor of the realm. Ed.

visit the sick two by two, each pair on its particular day of the week, to speak about those things necessary for salvation in a touching and familiar manner. All these exercises of piety were carried out with so much fervor that all the ladies were stimulated by the example of Mademoiselle le Gras, who applied herself to them with such ardor that Monsieur de Paul had to moderate her zeal.

In order to fulfill this work of charity well, there had to be servants who saw to the purchase and preparation of all the necessities and who could assist the ladies in both their visits and the distribution of the snacks. Mademoiselle le Gras began to train servants to devote themselves to promote the interests of the poor. She sent a few of them to the ladies, who provided quarters for them near the Hôtel-Dieu. From the first year of the foundation of this assembly, it bore so much fruit in the hospital through the visits and instruction of these ladies that they were able to prepare a large number of Catholics for a good death or, for those who recovered, a change of life. The ladies had the consolation of converting more than 700 heretics and some infidels who embraced our holy faith. They recognized the true faith because of the fruits of an ardent and expansive charity, which Paris was not large enough to contain. Next these women not only undertook this work in the provinces but also maintained some missions in the countries of the infidels, who felt their beneficial effects.

While this general assembly of ladies from all parts of Paris labored at these works of piety in the Hôtel-Dieu, individual Confraternities of Charity were beginning to form in the city's parishes. Established to assist the poor and sick artisans in their homes, the confraternities were composed of ladies of the parish and ran, under the pastor's guidance, with three officers chosen from among the women, namely, a superior who received the sick, a treasurer who held alms in trust, and a woman who had charge of clothing and other necessary furnishings. Seeing the progress they made, Monsieur de Paul added the finishing touch through the zeal of Mademoiselle le Gras. Because a large number of these ladies were not in a position to serve the sick themselves, they were given girls from Mademoiselle le Gras's community, who were committed by their profession to this charitable service. Since the number of girls joining rose every day, Mademoiselle bought a house in the village of La Chappelle near Paris. She found this location very convenient as well as suitable to her purpose of being nearer to Monsieur de Paul, who in 1632 had obtained the house of Saint-Lazare for the priests of the Congregation. Her intention was to raise her new



community in the spirit of servants of the poor and to inculcate it with the impoverished, humble, simple, and laborious style of country life. The Daughters' nourishment, clothing, and employment were regulated toward this goal. In May 1636 Mademoiselle le Gras moved and established the catechism, which she conducted herself for women and girls on Sundays and holy days in the schools where her Daughters taught little girls. This still continues in places where the community is established. Since the employments of charity multiplied every day and increased, the need for more frequent contact with those taking part became important. Mademoiselle le Gras decided, with the advice of Monsieur de Paul, to leave La Chapelle and come to reside with the community in the Faubourg Saint-Denis opposite Saint-Lazare. In 1641 she first rented a house and subsequently bought it.

It was here that she began to practice hospitality by receiving a large number of girls from the borders of Picardy, who had been forced to leave their homes for fear of enemies who had entered the province and besieged the city of Corbie. The girls had come to Paris seeking refuge. Not content with providing them lodging and food, Mademoiselle le Gras wanted to add spiritual alms by arranging a mission for them. This mission was also open to other women who wanted to make a spiritual retreat along the lines of those Monsieur de Paul had organized for men at the house of Saint-Lazare.

This servant of God had established the Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés, which he turned over to the care of Mademoiselle le Gras and her Daughters. In 1639 the city of Angers requested some of her Daughters for the service of the sick in its hospital. She herself went to open this institution in November notwithstanding her infirmities and the rigors of the season. It was during this trip that she learned that Queen Anne of Austria had also requested her Daughters for the service of the sick at Fontainebleau. This princess had supported a hospital for ill and wounded soldiers during the siege of Dunkirk and wished to turn it over to the Daughters too.

Even though Mademoiselle le Gras saw her Company charged with so many works in Paris, in the countryside, and in the provinces she did not lose courage. On the contrary, redoubling her zeal and her care, she took on more works in foreign kingdoms by sending her Daughters to the Queen of Poland, Louise-Marie Gonzague, who established them in Warsaw in 1652. At the time, that city was infected with an epidemic which caused the Daughters to have a difficult adjustment and dangerous trials. On their arrival they were given the

task of caring for the victims of the plague. The princess had also founded a hospital in that same city for poor orphaned and abandoned girls, which she also confided to the servants of Jesus Christ.

In Paris they were also given charge of the management, finances, and service of the poor of the *Hôpital du Nom-de-Jésus*, founded in 1643 to accommodate forty poor people, twenty of each sex. This was the beginning of the *Hôpital Général*.<sup>12</sup> It only remained for Mademoiselle le Gras to complete the extent of her zeal by taking on the care of the poor mentally ill people who had been interned in the *Hôpital des Petites Maisons*. She accepted this task in 1645 because of the pleas of the Assembly of the Great Bureau of the Poor, so well known in Paris because of the quality and merit of the people who comprised it.<sup>13</sup> Since there were in this hospital, besides the mentally ill, a large number of older persons placed there by order of this bureau, Mademoiselle le Gras took on the task of assisting them in their infirmity.

It was not enough for this zealous foundress to have formed a Company of Daughters to be employed in the service of the poor and to have them united among themselves in bonds of charity. Her love for the poor having suggested to her the need to confirm and strengthen forever this pious work, she wrote about this in 1651 to Monsieur de Paul, who approved her plan and sent her a memorandum to present to the archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi. This memorandum contained first of all an explanation of the role of the Providence of God in the establishment of the Daughters, second, their manner of life up to that time, and third, the statutes and regulations drawn up for them. The archbishop granted his approbation and authorized the establishment of the Company. He had his coadjutor, Cardinal de Retz, issue the proper letters to that effect.<sup>14</sup> When it came time to present these letters to Parlement for registration, they had become lost.<sup>15</sup> Cardinal de Retz was then archbishop and reissued new letters in January 1655 by

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<sup>12</sup>In about 1643 Vincent de Paul received 100,000 *livres* from a donor who, wishing to remain anonymous, wanted it used for charitable work. Vincent purchased and refurbished a house to shelter the poor. Opened a decade later in 1653, the Hospice du Nom-de-Jésus was entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. This new endeavor so impressed the Ladies of Charity of Paris that, with Vincent's approval, they undertook the establishment of the *Hôpital Général* using the house and grounds of La Salpêtrière, donated for this purpose by Anne of Austria. Ed.

<sup>13</sup>The Daughters took charge of this hospice in 1655. Ed.

<sup>14</sup>In fact these events took place in 1645 and 1646. Approbation was given in November of the latter year by Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, nephew of the archbishop and son of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi. At that time coadjutor of Paris, he later became the second Cardinal de Retz, the title held by his other uncle, Henri de Gondi, who preceded Jean-François in the see of Paris. Ed.

<sup>15</sup>The papers lost were the archbishop's approbation and the king's letters patent granting royal approval of the Daughters. Ed.

which he approved the society with its statutes and regulations and by his authority established it into a congregation under the title of Servants of the Poor. It was placed under the direction of the superior general of the [Congregation of] Mission and his successors, with the proviso, however, that it remain perpetually subordinate to the archbishop of Paris. After obtaining these letters, Monsieur de Paul convoked an assembly of all the Daughters in the house of the community on 8 August of the same year to establish the Company formally and to communicate to them the statutes and regulations he had drawn up. After having taken the names of those who had been received and who wished to remain in the institute, he appointed officers, the first of whom was Mademoiselle le Gras. He asked her to continue her duty as superioress for the rest of her life. He then named an assistant, a treasurer, and a bursar. He concluded the assembly with an exhortation to thank God for their vocation and to be exact and faithful in the observance of their rule. The congregation was then authorized by letters patent from the king in 1657 and confirmed in 1660 by Cardinal de Vendôme, Pope Clement IX's legate to France.<sup>16</sup>

Such was the establishment of the Daughters of Charity and the manner God used to bring to perfection this work so useful to the Church. Nothing more remained except for the foundress to go receive her recompense in heaven. God granted her this grace on 15 March 1660. She died on Monday of Passion Week at the age of sixty-eight. Her wake lasted a day and a half at the request of several ladies, who wanted the consolation of seeing her again after her death and of paying her their last respects of veneration and love. Although it had been expected that she would be buried in the cemetery near Saint-Lazare, she was interred the following Wednesday in the church of Saint-Laurent in the chapel of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin where she regularly had gone to pray. As she had requested, a cross bearing the words *Spes mea* [my hope] was placed near her grave. Opposite it, another cross was attached to the wall of the chapel.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>The last date is obviously incorrect. Clement IX was pope from 1667-1669. His predecessor, Alexander VII elevated Louis de Vendôme to the cardinalate at the final consistory of his pontificate in March 1667. The new cardinal was sent by Clement as legate to France in 1668, the year the above mentioned confirmation probably took place. Ed.

<sup>17</sup>Rather than *Spes mea*, the motto on cross was *Spes unica* (the only hope). The second cross, also bearing this inscription, was placed on the chapel's outside wall overlooking the graves of the Daughters who had gone before Louise. Ed.

Since the death of this foundress, the Daughters of Charity have begun a great number of establishments and continue to open new ones every day. Currently there are more than 290 in France, Poland, and the Low Countries. More than 1,500 Daughters work in these establishments under the authority of the principal house located in Paris in the Faubourg Saint-Denis opposite Saint-Lazare. These Daughters ordinarily have no endowments nor do they own houses. With the exception of the seminary in Paris, the dwellings where they live belong to the poor or to the Confraternities of Charity, which, when they have no buildings of their own, rent them. They are fed in the hospitals where they live like the poor or the sick, and each one is given a very modest salary to support herself. Elsewhere they live and support themselves on a modest enough sum secured by a stable and irrevocable contract. Young women who wish to enter this institute are received into the seminary, that is, their house in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, without having to provide a dowry. It is enough that they bring a small amount of money to pay for their first habit and furnishings, all of which is returned to them in kind or in value if they leave. Inquiries are made before they are admitted to see if there was any improper behavior in their lives or morals since youth or in their families. After having lived six months in the seminary in ordinary dress, they are given the habit of the institute. They are formed in the exercises of piety, the observance of the rules, and the employments of the institute. When they are sufficiently instructed and trained in all their obligations, they are sent to the cities and villages according to the needs.

After their entrance into the seminary, they have a trial period of five years, at the end of which they are admitted to vows which are simple and only for a year. For the rest of their lives they renew these on 25 March after having obtained the permission of their superiors. The Daughters are under the direction of the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, who guides them himself or by a priest director of the same Congregation living at Saint-Lazare and by the visitors of the provinces. He names their confessors, who are approved by the ordinary of the place, and when he judges proper, he withdraws or changes the Daughters from the houses where they have been sent.

From time to time they are brought back to the seminary to be renewed in the spirit of holiness of their institute through the spiritual exercises of an eight-day retreat. Besides the large number of parishes in Paris where there are always two or three sisters residing to care for the poor, the Daughters are also established at the Hôtel Royal des

Invalides, the Hôpital des Incurables, at Les Petites Maisons, and at the city's two Maisons d'Enfants-Trouvés. They are still in charge of feeding and assisting both the galley slaves and the inmates of several prisons as well as of preparing and distributing meals to the sick poor of the Hôtel-Dieu. The superioress of the seminary is elected every three years and may have a second three-year term. As to their clothing, it is made of gray fabric cut simply and modestly, and their headdress is a white cornette.